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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT MORESBY 000400

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [BP](#)
SUBJECT: TIME TO SPEAK ON SOLOMON ISLANDS

REF: CANBERRA 1411

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert Fitts, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Port
Moresby, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: The sometimes erratic and often combative Solomon Islands Prime Minister has signaled he intends to continue to confront Australia and to try to roll back the influence of RAMSI. By appointing as Attorney General Julian Moti, a dubious lawyer and embittered opponent of Australian policies in the Pacific, Sogavare has shown that his recent expulsion of the Australian High Commissioner was not a one off event. Though RAMSI retains public support for its restoration of public order, the Solomon political elite is restive under RAMSI's continued anti corruption drive. Thus, we cannot predict the outcome of the no-confidence motion planned for early October. We propose that U.S. encourage responsibility by issuing a statement of support for continuation of the progress made under RAMSI without specifically addressing the many worrisome initiatives of the current PM. END SUMMARY

AN ODIIOUS A/G

2.(C) On Sept 21, Sogavare's government confirmed its critic's fears by appointing Julian Moti as Attorney General. In a region strewn with dubious characters, Moti is particularly odious. He has long been associated with corrupt politicians and businessmen in several Pacific countries. In 1994, he was deported from Solomon Islands for his role in pressing the then Governor General to bring down a government which was trying to assert control over Malaysian/Chinese logging companies which had retained Moti. Next, in Vanuatu he was charged in 1998 with repeatedly molesting a 13 year old girl. He beat that rap by appealing a technicality; the charge sheet had specified the girl was "under" 13 when her age was actually 13. Hardly a Clarence Darrow moment. The girl then sued and he settled out of court. Moti was reportedly then made unwelcome in Vanuatu.

3.(U) In view of his past actions and associations, the Solomon Islands Bar Association strongly recommended against Moti's long-rumored appointment.

4.(SBU) A resentful Australian of Fijian-Indian heritage, Moti has blamed the Bar recommendation and his past troubles on racist white influence over island stooges. In public, he has declared his readiness to give his all to combat what he terms as Australia's racist and colonialist policies in the Pacific.

5.(C) His first task is already apparent. He has been the attorney defending Charles Dausebea and Nelson Ne'e, two MPs powerful in Sogavare's coalition who are now in jail, charged with fomenting the April political violence which led to his

ascension into office. Sogavare has since been assiduously working to free them and Moti as Attorney General is just the guy to do it.

AN ERRATIC PM

6.(C) Sogavare had appointed Dausebea and Ne'e as ministers in his government despite their records of corruption and political thuggery (for which Dausebea is barred from entry to the U.S. or Australia). But trying at all costs to spring them is not his only contrary, and occasionally loopy, initiative.

7.(C) Though he will profess to questioners his appreciation for RAMSI's assistance, Sogavare couples that with a caveat that RAMSI expat advisors should be eased out of the key line civil service positions where they now serve as a check on the whims of his ministers. It is probably no accident that he gives priority to localizing the positions in the Finance ministry which must sign off on government expenditures. The last time he was PM, his government earned a reputation for casual corruption that was notable even by Solomons standards.

8.(SBU) Under the influence of a shadowy Filipino-Chinese advisor, Ramon Quitales, Sogavare has been pressing a scheme to abolish the Central Bank and import a printing press to rapidly expand the money supply. Though Quitales bills himself a businessman, no one in the Honiara business community could tell us what business he was in. The most common opinion was that he was a bit of a con artist.

9.(C) Sogavare is a bit of a con himself, ready to tell listeners what they want to hear. He privately assured early senior visitors from other Melanesian nations that his efforts on behalf of Dausebea were for show only. His subsequent actions have given the lie to that assertion. He outlined to us his grand scheme to solve ethnic divisions by ensuring that all aggrieved parties were compensated. But then he went on to note

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that he would fund this by printing money. Presumably, he thinks simple islanders would be content with rapidly depreciating paper. He has told interlocutors that he was looking to patch things up with Australia, but his choice of Moti makes that a mockery.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

10.(C) Sogavare's motley cabinet coalition of five parties contains other odd ducks. Foreign Minister Patteson Oti can talk the responsible talk, but in practice waddles along the same as the PM. We understand that he advised Sogavare to expel the Australian High Commissioner, assuring him the disturbance would soon blow over. Though he assured A/S Hill of his support for RAMSI, Oti has also been chafing to loosen RAMSI's influence within the government.

AN UNPREDICTABLE PARLIAMENT

11.(SBU) The Solomon Island Parliament now sitting is comprised of 50 individuals each with their own interests and many with their own angles. Few are constrained by loyalty to the fragmented parties into which they are organized. Though, the last Parliament unanimously voted to invite RAMSI in, many politicians have since been taken aback by the slow but steady focus of RAMSI on anti-corruption. Three members of the past cabinet ended up in jail or facing charges.

12.(C) RAMSI, at least the law and order part, still enjoys such widespread support that most politicians would not try to take RAMSI head on. (Dausebea is an exception.) But many would be delighted to find a way to erode its influence and regain the freedom of the cookie jar which is the reason they got into Solomon politics in the first place. Accordingly, we cannot confidently predict that Sogavare will lose the no-confidence motion now set for the session of Parliament beginning October 2.

A TIME TO SPEAK

13.(SBU) The EU and the UK have already joined the Australians and the New Zealanders in expressing sharp and specific concern

over recent developments. Typically, Australia has been the most direct. Foreign Minister Downer is quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald as observing that the Solomon Island people have "been treated very badly and very shoddily and shabbily by their politicians over many years."

14.(C) That is certainly true. But, Australia and RAMSI must continue to have sanction of at least a majority of those politicians to make any progress. Accordingly, we recommend a more general US statement, appealing to the better side of the lesser devils. For, in current Solomon politics, there are no angels.

PROPOSED US STATEMENT

15.(C) The United States congratulates Solomon Islands on the progress it made over the past three years with the assistance of its neighbors under RAMSI. However, as illustrated by the still recovering economy and the lapse back into social violence last April, there is still enormous work left to do. Though public order is restored, government institutions must still be rebuilt so that they can earn the trust of all Solomon Islands citizens. In particular, the separation of powers among government branches is vital to ensure that the interests of all citizens are fairly addressed.

16.(C) The United States therefore urges that the leaders of Solomon Islands continue to work closely with the neighbors who have extended their nation such large-scale assistance and support, both through RAMSI and through bilateral programs.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

17(C) Any US statement should be issued prior to October 2 so as to register with parliamentarians as they weigh the worrisome performance of the current government. Though the U.S. now has few programs in the country, we retain a great deal of respect. Out statement would count.

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